

Eastview students participate in e-mentor project

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The feeling of anticipation filled Eastview High School students March 30 as they entered the offices of Northwest Airlines (NWA) and West Group in Eagan to meet their e-mentors.

After eight weeks of correspondence via e-mail, students were able to meet the volunteer employees who had taught them about the workplace and technology.

Barb Groth and Leah Lencowski, teachers at Eastview, integrated the mentoring opportunity into the curriculum of their keyboarding classes.

"It was a real great way to incorporate technology into the curriculum, which is something we're always trying to do, and give students real world experience without leaving the classroom," Lencowski said.

BestPrep, a nonprofit company that has been running educational programs for 28 years throughout the Twin Cities, developed the e-mentorship program through its Tech Corps connections.

Tech Corps connects technology volunteers with schools in various ways. Sometimes the volunteers refurbish computers in the classroom or provide free tech support.

In this instance, the volunteers discussed their technology careers with the Eastview students.

Each week students asked a different question, such as workplace challenges and rewards. Gradually, a discussion formed through the e-mails.

"At first I wasn't sure what to expect," said senior Kathleen Lallier.

In the beginning, Kathleen said she stuck to the specific questions they were given for the project. But, after a while she started to let her personality enter into their conversations.

Groth and Lencowski received a copy of every e-mail correspondence between the students and mentors in their own e-mail, which allowed the teachers to both monitor the interaction and evaluate the students on their assignment.

Preston Dahl, sophomore, said at first it was awkward to correspond with someone he's never met. But, soon it became easier as they got to know one another.

Chad Howard, a junior, was paired with an employee at West Group whose name also was Chad.

Once setting up an e-mail account to communicate, Chad said he and his mentor discussed their goals, how the employees got to where they are, characteristics of the workplace and what their future plans are.

"I learned what they do during the day and more about how to get out into the workplace," Chad said.

Chad said he plans to pursue a career in either aviation or law.

"It was fun," Chad said. "We made a new friend."

For students who have never been exposed to the business world, Kathleen said the experience helped illustrate what options are available after high school.

Kathleen plans to attend Inver Hills Community College and later transfer to Winona State University to major in elementary education.

"I think what I learned is you should always listen to what people are saying," Kathleen said. "If you talk to someone and get to know them, it turns out you might have a really good friend."

At the conclusion of the eight-week program, students met face-to-face with their mentors. The students also toured the NWA and West Group facilities

"It was lots of fun and it was even more fun to meet her in person," Kathleen said.

Freshman Keeley Briaud said, "You have a totally different perspective for what they look like and how they act."

Kathleen said she plans to keep in touch with her mentor.

Carrie Albin, program manager for BestPrep, said that more West Group employees volunteered than the number of students in the Eastview classes. And at NWA, 25 volunteers were gathered in one day.

Albin said that the program benefited both the students and the employees. Students received an in-depth look at technology in the workplace while the volunteers were given the opportunity to share their skills.

Better than what he expected, Preston said, having an e-mentor added suspense to the project.

Preston said he learned both e-mail skills and how to communicate with a new person.

"It's really interesting to see what their workplace looked like," Preston said.

Sophomore Sean Steichen said he learned about the daily job of his mentor, while sophomore Rachel Klemz said she learned how her mentor balanced her day between work and family.

In addition to the mentoring program, BestPrep offers other opportunities for schools and corporate volunteers.

Classroom Plus connects guest speakers with schools to discuss careers ranging from healthcare to technology.

The Minnesota Business Venture is a two-week long summer camp that teaches basic business skills and financial literacy. Business leaders spend the week with students to share their skills in the profession.

BestPrep offers a summer camp on the integration of technology and workplace skills into the classroom for seventh- through 12th-grade teachers.

BestPrep also sponsors the Minnesota chapter of the Stock Market Game, a national program that allows students to invest \$100,000 in fictitious money.

Groth said she learned of BestPrep's opportunities through a seminar and Eastview was one of the first schools to try the e-mentoring program.

Sophomore Grant Moore said he would recommend participation in a mentor program to other students. He said it helped him to see what types of jobs are out there.

"I do think I learned something," said sophomore Harold Valro. "But it wasn't in a professional way, it was more like being a friend way."

Groth said she hopes to expand the mentoring program into other classes next year.

For more information on BestPrep, visit www.bestprep.org.

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